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UNIVERSITIES: WAYS TO INCLUDE DISABLED STUDENTS

ON DECEMBER 3 we observe the annual International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD).

The theme for 2020 is "Building Back Better: toward a disability-inclusive, accessible and sustainable post Covid-19 World".

As we have all experienced, 2020 has been completely disrupted by the impact of Covid-19. Although educational institutions across the globe have embraced the promotion of full participation for people with disabilities, the pandemic posed extreme challenges in continuing the academic commitments to all students.

When we talk about disabilities, the emphasis is largely on providing access and participation of people with physical and sensory disabilities enrolled at educational institutions.

With physical spaces not accessible during the pandemic, the ramps, lifts, etc were of little value. What became apparent was the need for a more intangible type of access. This is real access to the curriculum.

I want to focus on Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) which result in less visible barriers to learning. The individual experiences an inadequate ability to "listen, think, speak, read, write, and spell or to do mathematical calculations", as pointed out by the Learning Disabilities Association of America.

These barriers have grave implications for academic performance as they hinder the ability to learn or use specific academic skills that form the foundation for other academic learning. People with SLD are generally of average or above average intelligence. However, there seems to be a gap between the person's potential and actual accomplishment.

Conditions classified as SLD include auditory-processing disorder, dyscalculia (math learning disability), dysgraphia (writing disability) and dyslexia. Other related disorders include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia (developmental co-ordination disorder) and executive dysfunction and memory disorder.

With the implementation of inclusive policies and support structures at the level of basic education, there is an international increase in students with disabilities enrolling in universities.

South Africa has adopted the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support strategy to be implemented in all public schools from 2017. This allows for early identification of barriers to learning, such as SLD, in order to provide appropriate support to learners as early as possible.

Currently, our Department of Higher Education and Training does not have a similar policy to continue the provision of support when students enrol.

Initial attempts to promote inclusive practices emphasised the accessibility of buildings to enhance participation of students with physical and sensory disabilities. However, as more students with SLD started to enrol at tertiary institutions, policies to support them were developed. Nonetheless, in order to receive this support, students need to self-declare that they have a SLD. They must "prove" their need for support by submitting a recent assessment report from a psychologist.

It should come as no surprise then that a review of literature from 1994 to 2017 on the experiences of undergraduate students with SLD has shown that they choose to refrain from disclosing their disability because of fear of stigmatisation and possible negative perceptions from lecturers.

This fear of stigmatisation also seems to be confirmed when students experience reluctance from lecturers to recognise the need for proper inclusive practices in class. It seems as if there is no uniform interpretation of policy among lecturing and administrative staff in general. These experiences leave students to feel that the lecturers "misunderstood" them or made them "feel guilty for asking for support".

Universities need to take lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic in order to look and move beyond visible structures to provide authentic access and participation of all students, in particular those with disabilities.

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